DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 247 RC 017 303

AUTHOR Kilcrease, Maxine Wallender
TITLE "Ready, Set, Go!" A Model Community Resource Plan for Rural Schools.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 11p.; In: Education and the Changing Rural Community: Anticipating the 21st Century. Proceedings of the 1989 ACRES/NRSSC Symposium. See RC 017 257.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Resources; Educational Planning; Elementary Education; Learning Centers (Classroom); *Program Development; *Resource Room Programs; *Rural Schools; *School Community Programs; Special Education; *Special Education Teachers; Volunteers; Volunteer Training
IDENTIFIERS Oregon

ABSTRACT

This document describes a community resource plan developed for rural special educators at a small elementary school near Salem, Oregon. The plan was designed for the specific needs of rural special educators, who generally have greater need for materials, personnel support, and financing than their urban counterparts. The resource plan includes: needs assessment; grant writing; cross-age and peer tutor training; the use of volunteers and paraprofessionals; implementation; and evaluation. To implement the plan, a model special education teacher must first perform a self assessment using Frank Hewitt's (1980) list of competencies as a framework. The school's resource room program is then evaluated. A community resource plan cannot be implemented until one establishes the basic components of an effective resource room. Finally, a teacher should assess the needs of the students, define the necessary clerical tasks of the proposed program, and prioritize the levels of service being offered. Once initiated, the community resource plan should include elements of recruitment, orientation, selection, placement, training, and evaluation. Cross-age and peer tutors may be trained using a similar format to one used for training community volunteers. After the program was instituted, the number of referrals to the school's multidisciplinary team dropped by 75%, as did the number of students eligible for special education services. (TES)

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Maxine Wallender Kilcrease
Western Oregon State College
Ed 110
345 N. Monmouth Ave.
Monmouth, Oregon 97361

ED315247

"Ready, Set, Go!"
A Model Community Resource Plan for Rural Schools

Rural special educators face many challenges on the job. Those challenges include lack of funds for materials, lack of support personnel, students with every handicapping condition (especially challenging are the low-incidence students) and a lack of time and energy to meet these challenges.

As a response to this need, a community resource plan was developed in 1983 for Rosedale Elementary School, a small rural school, south of Salem, Oregon. Over a period of three years the plan was refined.

The resource plan included: Needs Assessments, Grant Writing, Training Cross-Age and Peer Tutors, Paraprofessionals and Volunteers, Implementation and Evaluation. The resource plan was very effective. Elements of the plan have been implemented in 37 elementary schools in the area. The purpose of this presentation is to share the essential elements of the plan so that it may be successfully implemented in other rural schools around the country.

Especially unique to the plan is the rural focus. The people who live in rural areas are like no others. In order to have an understanding of how to work with rural folks, one has to have what the fur trapper, Joe Meek, called "a knowin' beyond the book larnin' ". Because this is true, special educators will find this plan has been carefully developed with community culture and needs as the main focus. It was designed by a rural special educator and its success in rural areas is documented.

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The elements of the Community Resource Plan are divided under three headings: The Model Resource Teacher, The Model Resource Room, Training Cross Age and Peer Tutors, Paraprofessionals, and Volunteers and finally, Evaluation.

"Ready!": The Model Rural Special Education Teacher

Before a rural special education teacher develops a community resource plan, it is essential for a self-evaluation to be done. Community resource plans are effective, in part, because the rural special education teacher has taken a good look at whether or not s/he is ready for community involvement. How is this determined? One can examine a model for a quality special education teacher and within that model characterize the do's and don'ts for being successful. Second, one can complete a survey which asks some questions about issues related to other personnel in the classroom which is part of the community resource plan. Completion of these two exercises enable the rural special educator to see themselves more clearly, to be aware of strengths and weakness, and better equipped to make decisions.

As a framework for discussion, Frank Hewitt's (1980) list of competencies will be used. The list of competencies is a result of research done by the staff at the Neuropsychiatric School at the University of California, Los Angeles. The competencies are listed in order of importance from the most basic level to the highest level.

First, the teacher must possess objectivity. This means that the teacher will be knowledgeable in all areas of the field. The teacher must be secure in self, not needing the love of all or seeking vicarious satisfaction through the students. The insecurity of teachers puts a burden on students. It makes them prey to manipulators. It destroys consistency. It causes children to be confused and unable to respond consistently because the teacher's mood must be checked first. In regard to staff relations, it causes many problems in facilitating the educational process for students. Part of the objectivity issue is clarity. Repeatedly, the research documents the importance of clarity in teacher differential behavior. The teacher can be high structure, high relationship, or low

structure, high relationship in teaching and leadership styles. The nonverbal behaviors may be negative or positive. The key is that students are aware of expectations and the corresponding consequences (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985; Vera, Fortune, & Hudson, 1985). When expectations become fuzzy or unpredictable, the students' behavior and academic performance suffer.

The second competency is flexibility. Flexibility is defined as making transitions and changes freely, as necessary. A person who is secure will not have difficulty being flexible. Flexibility applies to the reaction to behavior and situations as well as making changes. The teacher must be able to control reactions to behavior expecially, and that's not easy. Self-control modeled to a student shows a student that such self-control is possible for them too. Alexis and Mitman (1985) documented that teachers who were flexible had more accurate perceptions of lower achieving students and showed more concern for them. Flexibility is also important to respond to changes needed in the classroom environment and instructional programs when they do not work. Rigidity can easily be identified in programs because characteristic patterns for non-compliant behavior exist, little or no academic progress is being made by the group, or no one is being referred to the special education program. Finally, flexibility is important in relationship to staff members, parents and members of the community. Rural special education teachers are in building to provide a service and to responsive to changing needs. Not a lot of research is available in this area yet, but directors of special education and principals freely tell, if asked, how quickly lack of flexibility can ruin a program.

The third competency is structure. Structure is defined as possessing the skill to provide enviornmental and situational structure to the degree decessary at appropriate times to meet needs. This means a solid behavior management system is needed. The behavior management system must include several components to be effective. Wayson and Lasley (1984) recommend a building-wide policy. A review of programs and data document the inclusion of the following: (1) creating a student belongingness and responsibility; (2) pursuing superordinate school goals; (3) creating symbols of identity and excellence; (3) fostering leadership to sustain positive school values; and (5) creating clear formal and

informal rules. Added to these elements are consistency, cooperation and continued communication. A well-developed structure povides the secure environment for educational progress.

The four competency is resourcefulness. Resourcefulness is defined as the ability to create instructional materials out of nothing and to find appropriate instructional materials to meet every need. Instruction is based on a multisensory approach and is tied to a reality, meaning base.

The fifth competency is social reinforcement. Social reinforcement is defined as appropriate reinforcement to meet individual needs. The teacher needs to dtermine where a student is on the continuum of behavior and to identify where the locus of control is- external to internal.

The sixth competency is curriculum expertise. Curriculum expertise is defined as knowing the curriculum and the curriculum materials. It is the tailpiece of assessment, diagnosis, and prescription.

Hewitt's seventh and final competency is intellectual model. The teacher as an intellectual model is an example of successful interpersonal relationships, leadership, perhaps even study skills and others. Everyone knows that modeling is the most powerful teaching tool there is. It is the hardest part of teaching because there is so much responsiblity but it exists with tremendous potential to effect change.

Hewitt's competencies are impressive. However, one cannot help adding a few points to his list. First, teachers should regularly evaluate themselves and their programs. Second, continuing education is very important. Finally, skills in assessment and diagnosis are vital to the success of any rural special education teacher.

Using this framework, the teacher evaluates their skill level. If the teacher decides that most of the competencies are met, then it is appropriate to begin asking some questions about the teacher in relationship to having members of the community, paraprofessionals, volunteers, and parents serve the needs of students in the resource room.

The questions are adapted from A Guide to Human Resources in Special Education (Fimian, Fafard & Howell, 1984) and are as follows:

1. Do I have a good relationship with the staff, parents, and members of the community?

2. Can I work cooperatively with a resource worker?

3. Will another person in the classroom reduce, or increase behavior problems?

4. Will I feel threatened by another person in the classroom?

5. Can I be flexible?

6. Am I, or can I be, sensitive to the worker's contribution to the class?

7. Can I learn to take the extra time and give the extra input to make the worker's experience a success?

8. How do I feel about the changes that will inevitably be introduced into my classroom as a result of the worker's presence?

9. Do I have staff support and input?

10. Can I delegate responsibility?

11. Can I handle the evaluation?

By answering the questions honestly, one can evaluate one's readiness for involvment of others in the resource room program. The next phase of the assessment process is an evaluation of the resource room program.

"SetI": The Rural Special Education Resource Room Program

The next element for evaluation is the resource room program. Until one can firmly establish the following basic components for an effectively functioning resource room program, one probably does not want to implement a community resource plan. The components include: a building philosophy, the resource room model, the instructional skills continuum, the school-wide and classroom discipline policies, communication, management issues, and the needs assessment.

First, it is very important to decide as a building staff what the philosophy of the school will be. Issues such as the goals and objectives as they relate to staff, students, parents and community must be explored. This effort is important because it encourages collaboration and cooperation among all staff members and enables everyone in the building to work toward the same goal and focus in unity and harmony. Often this is done by the principal in the building.

Second, it is very important as an individual teacher to decide what the resource room program will look like. What kind of students will you serve? Will gray-area students as well as those who are talented and gifted and handicapped be welcome? The vision and expectation of the program should be very clear so that the boundaries of what can be accomplished effectively are drawn. Teachers often attempt to do way too much or to do things way beyond what the hours in a day allow. This dilutes program effectiveness.

Third, every teacher must know the instructional skills continuum for the district and the district curriculum.

Fourth, a school-wide discipline and classroom discipline policy should be in place and functioning smoothly and effectively.

Fifth, management of time, personnel, material, equipment and facilities must be under control. The teacher needs to have a schedule board so that time is carefully planned and so that other staff members are aware of how time is allocated. If an instructional assistant is already a part of the resource staff the relationship should be harmonious.

There should be an adequate range of materials and resources. Grant writing is a vital part of the resource teacher's job. There should be a section of materials exclusively for resource room use and another section for teachers to check out and use with special needs students in the regular classroom or for professional development. Next, the teacher will be comfortable with the room arrangement and space. Furthermore, the teacher will have paperwork under control. The teacher will effectively manage filling out all federal, state and local paperwork in a timely manner. Daily data, home communication cards, and staff communication cards and checklists are consistently filled out. Equipment is in good condition and the teacher knows how everything works. These are the nuts and bolts of the program.

Finally, the teacher must complete an assessment of the needs of the program. The needs assessment must be divided into two parts needs of students for instruction and clerical tasks. The teacher needs to set up time wheels for how time is presently being spent. How many hours a week are spent in direct instruction, attending meetings, consultant services, testing and diagnostic services, staff development, and other services? How many hours a week are spent in filling out forms, collecting data, making bulletin boards, correcting papers, planning lessons, and other clerical tasks? Next, the teacher needs to compare this to two figures: the number of hours the teacher should actually be working and the unmet needs which still exist. By making these comparisons the teacher can determine how many hours per week are still needed for clerical and instructional tasks. These figures will help the teacher solicit the kind of helpers needed in order to implement the community resource plan.

By completing the evaluation of the individual and the program, the teacher now has a very good idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the program and whether or not the teacher and the program are ready for the development and implementation of a community resource plan.

"Go!": Training of Volunteers, Paraprofessionals, Cross-Age and Peer Tutors

After the completion of the needs assessment, it becomes necessary for the teacher to prioritize the levels of service which will be offered in the program. Some areas of consideration include direct instruction, testing, meetings, consultant services, staff development, and team building. Once the priorities have been determined, the development of the plan begins. The plan includes recruitment, orientation, selection, placement, training, and evaluation.

The recruitment process includes meeting with parents, members of the community and staff. A steering committee helps the resource teacher decide on the priority of the services needed based on each of their unique perspectives. After the needs have been identified, the members of the steering committee begin recruitment efforts. These include contacting the editor of the local newspaper, the seniors of the community, members of the parent club, and anyone else that might be interested in helping. The teacher contacts the parent of every child who receives services of any kind to come and observe in the resource room. This gives the parent the chance to observe the program, their child in action, and great needs for extra help in the resource room. The resource teacher gives each individual parent an opportunity to offer services in some way to help provide support for the resource room.

The next phase of the plan is to invite those people interested to come to an orientation session. This session is designed to make them aware of the needs of the children they might be working with, the kind of help that is needed, some ethical and professional standards, hands-on time with materials, discussion of data collection and time for discussion and questions and answers. An explanation of clerical versus instructional support is given. At this time interest forms are offered and people make application to participate in the training program. The teacher sets up a time to personally interview each person who has completed the form.

The steering committee then convenes again in order to select volunteers. The criterion for the selection of volunteer includes considerations such as the kind of help needed, the skills of the volunteer, the individual student, the amount of time and location of time to be committed, the level of commitment and the interpersonal skills of the volunteer. No volunteer is ever turned away. Sometimes, however, it does take time to come up with a good match between the volunteer and the tasks.

A tentative placement for the volunteer is made. The volunteer has the opportunity to observe the actual situation in which they will volunteer.

Next, the training takes place. Elements of the training session include the "Inside the Puzzle Child Workshop" (Instructor, February, 1984), the school and classroom philosophy, the school-wide and classroom discipline policies, student expectations, the role of the volunteer, and training in instruction using the model of : Model, Role Play, Performance Feedback, Reinforcement, and Transfer of Training.

Each volunteer is carefully supported, appreciated and monitored by the teacher. The volunteer and teacher informally evaluate each other. The staff members in the building and the parents regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the resource room program. When this is in place and functioning effectively cross-age and peer tutor programs may be added on.

The use of cross-age and peer tutors is very effective when certain criteria are implemented. The criteria for selection include: (1) 95% attendance, (2) 100% of the goals for academic success and behavior at their level of expected functioning in the classroom, and (3) an essay of at least one page or three minutes on cassette saying why they want to be a "Friendly Helper", and (4) a willingness to give up the time to tutor and to be a member of the "Friendly Helpers." Members of the multi-disciplinary team convene and select tutors. After the tutors are selected, they fill out a survey telling what subject areas they are comfortable tutoring in, what age level they are interested in, what sex, or whether they only want to do clerical work.

The tutors are then trained using a format very similar to the other volunteers. In addition, they meet on an once a week basis with the resource teacher or counselor to develop the skills of being a good tutor, especially appropriate way to help. This also gives them a chance to de-brief, to talk about problems and to get any help they might need. This serves as a continuing evaluative vehicle also.

Last, but certainly not least, it is important to let these volunteers know that they have made a difference. There are dozens of ways of doing this. It is also important to collect data on the numbers of volunteers, the number of hours they volunteer and the successes. These statistics are very helpful in evaluation, grant writing and report writing. After the institution of this program, the number of referrals to the multi-disciplinary team dropped by seventy five percent as did the number of students eligible for special education services. Over a four year period there was an average of forty hours per week of volunteer time spent in the resource room. The program expanded school wide and has been replicated in schools all over the West Coast.